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Confrontation in Korea

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36
24 January 1968
No. 0580/68

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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
24 January 1968

INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM

Confrontation in Korea

1. The Pueblo incident and the violent incursion by the North Koreans at Seoul have created a confrontation which now engages the interests of several parties, not only those of the US and North Korea. The attitudes and actions of the USSR, China, and the ROK, not to mention pressures and advice from others not so immediately involved, will complicate the further course of events.

2. We do not believe that we are dealing with a series of coordinated actions among the Communist powers which were intended, well ahead of time, to produce such a confrontation at this moment. It is true that all the Communist parties have an interest, because of Vietnam, in bringing diversionary pressures on the US. It is also true that the Communists may believe that the present military-political situation in Vietnam makes the US especially susceptible to such pressures.

3. We believe, however, that the present strained relations between the North Koreans and the Chinese rule out any serious collaboration between them. Nor do we believe that the Soviets had direct part in preparing either of the North Korean actions. The possible evidence on this point (Thompson's conversation with Kuznetsov) does not indicate any more than that the Soviet leaders expected Thompson's visit and prepared for it shortly beforehand. Moreover, the Soviets would wish, because of the magnitude of the risks potentially involved, to have exclusive control of the course of events; almost certainly they would not expect to have this degree of control over the North Koreans.

4. The North Koreans, of course, clearly have developed a pattern of aggressive actions toward the ROK inspired, at least in part, by a desire to

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exploit Seoul's involvement in Vietnam and to support Hanoi with diversionary pressures on the US. Probably the incursion at Seoul was conceived deliberately as a move of this kind, and as one at a new and higher level of overt violence and risk which was thought to be justified by the present situation in Vietnam. This would not mean, however, that the Pueblo incident was part of any prepared scenario.

5. Whatever may be the whole truth of the origins of the present confrontation, however, from this point forward all the Communist parties will wish to handle the affair in such a manner as to inflict the maximum feasible damage on the US position, particularly with reference to Vietnam. This would mean to compel some diversion of effort, but more especially to increase pressures on the US Government, at home and abroad; the effect they would hope, would be to make it more difficult for the US to sustain its present course in Vietnam. In attempting to maximize such pressures, however, account will be taken of risks; none of the Communist parties, we believe, would want the new focus of tension in Korea to develop into actual hostilities.

6. Moscow will now be making its advice heard in Pyongyang. We believe that this advice will be to milk the situation for all the embarrassment and pressure it is possible to inflict on the US, but to avoid further provocative action which might lead to US retaliatory measures. Probably Moscow will advise the Koreans to talk but to stonewall as long as feasible at the MAC table. The Soviets will also probably advise the Koreans to be prepared for the eventual return of the Pueblo crew. At this stage, such a course would probably suit the North Koreans' book. Should they be disposed to take a more belligerent course, however, we cannot be sure that the Soviets would be able to control all their moves.

7. What we know of the present relations between China and North Korea suggests that Peking has far less influence in Pyongyang than Moscow does. Indeed, the Chinese may not be consulted by the North

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Koreans. To the extent the Chinese do offer advice it will probably be ambiguous; they will be concerned primarily not to be less venturesome than the Soviets. We do not believe, however, that the Chinese would urge Pyongyang to any course of undue risk. This judgment derives from what we believe to be China's attitude toward the Vietnam war as well as from its internal situation.

8. In estimating the risks inherent in the present situation the Communist side will be conscious that the ROK, with or without US concurrence, has the capability to take actions which could balloon the crisis out of control. This consideration will probably argue for an additional measure of caution in further handling of the crisis.

9. In sum, we believe that at the present stage the Communist side will be in essential accord that their further moves should aim at forcing the US into humiliating acceptance of the North Korean affront if possible. The Communist parties will probably also agree that they should prolong the standoff for sometime, or at least until they become convinced that the US will resort to major retaliatory action, e.g., air strikes against North Korean naval targets. If in their view the danger of an uncontrollable clash becomes too great, they will probably take some partial step toward settling the Pueblo incident. The North Koreans may reach this view fairly quickly. Obviously the calculations on the Communist side will be close ones and easily subject to error.

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